

ARTICLE APPEARED
IN PAGE D-7

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Terrorism: An Administration Divided

Secretary of State George Shultz's startling speech—recommending military retaliation against international terrorists—gave a brief, tantalizing glimpse into the Reagan administration's policy councils.

After some initial confusion, in which Vice President George Bush disagreed with Shultz and President Reagan offered a cryptic response, the White House issued a statement insisting that everyone in the administration was united on the need for decisive action against terrorists.

But in reality, the president's advisers are split over how to deal with the terrorists who have turned American outposts overseas into shooting galleries.

I'm told that Shultz deliberately timed his provocative pronouncement to come just before the election. He is the leader of a hard-line faction within the administration that had been arguing, without success, for swift and punishing retaliation for the embassy bombing in Beirut.

The bitter policy dispute, papered over till after the election, remains to be resolved. Pitted against Shultz's faction are Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, the White House "pragmatists" and an influential group in the State Department.

The lineup is by no means exact or immutable, but administration sources told my associate Lucette Lagnado that the Pentagon is as badly fragmented on this issue as the White House and the State Department. The National Security Council largely supports the Shultz "get-tough" approach.

After the most recent embassy bombing in Beirut, there were discussions, at the highest levels, of possible targets for retaliation; these ranged from Shiite terrorist camps in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley of Lebanon to possible targets within Iran itself. In the end, cooler heads in the White House came down on the side of caution—some would say equivocation—basing their decision on strictly political grounds. The month before the election, they reasoned, was no time to risk reviving Reagan's hard-line image.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff lent their weight to the theory that a military strike against Iran or Syrian-controlled areas of Lebanon would simply begin a "cycle of retaliation." As Bush and other administration spokesmen have taken pains to point out, dealing with terrorist gangs is different from dealing with established governments. Punishing a sympathetic government for the acts of irresponsible terrorists is also a questionable tactic.

The Pentagon argued that there could be no guarantee that a surgical strike against the Iranians or the Syrians would bring an end to terrorist attacks against U.S. facilities. Quite possibly, it would merely provoke another attack—and another U.S. response—starting an endless "cycle of retaliation."

While Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs have managed to keep the lid on discontent within the Pentagon, I'm told that Shultz was called by at least one Pentagon official before he made his speech and told that they were not happy with it. But Shultz decided to force the administration's hand.

What infuriates the Pentagon dissidents is that they have what they consider unequivocal proof that the government of Iran was behind at least the latest embassy bombing. They point to the mysterious visit of Iranian President Khomeini to the terrorist site in Lebanon a few days before the embassy attack.

Shultz and the Pentagon dissenters feel that military retaliation against Tehran is justified—or at least could have been justified if it had been done within a few days of the embassy bombing. Now, they concede in frustration, it is too late to launch a retaliatory raid. The political pragmatists' delaying tactics have succeeded.

As for the Syrians, opinion within the administration is even more widely divided. The State Department, for example, got word from its Middle East intelligence sources that Assad was "angry" over the bombing. This lent weight to those who hope to cultivate Assad's cooperation in an eventual peace settlement in the region.

But these reports on Assad's reaction were greeted with skepticism at the Pentagon and in the intelligence community. These skeptics point out that the Syrians must have cooperated with the Iranian terrorists who actually carried out the embassy bombing—at least to the extent of letting them plot the attack under Syrian protection and pass Syrian army checkpoints with their deadly cargo.

But here again, the absence of concrete proof of Syrian complicity gave those who urged caution an arguing point. Then, by delaying the ultimate decision, they made retaliation politically impossible.

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